

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION
Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

Faith Coxe Bailey

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Chapter 5

Skid Row Has Two Ends - GEORGE A. LIND

THE old man tottered along the slushy sidewalk in Chicago's Skid Row. The icy wind ripped at his ragged overcoat, buttoned high under his stubbly chin. Folding his bony arms across his chest, he hunched forward into the wind. He had no home to turn back to. He could only keep on slipping and sliding on the slick street. He was going nowhere, and he knew it. On and on, down one block, across another, went old George.

The sharp wind and sleet bit harder into his thin old cheeks down which tears streamed steadily. He wasn't crying. Nothing left to cry about. These were tears of sickness, of aching cold, of protection for his old eyes from the razors of wind slashing at him around every building and up every filthy alley on that bitter January morning in 1919. George had no money, no job. He was a lonely, heartbroken old man, without a single friend.

Exhausted by fighting the wind, blinded by sleet, he leaned against a building at the corner of an alley and fought for his breath. The alley, a canyon of ice-lined walls, seemed like a shelter to him. Midway down the canyon there was a hotel kitchen, belching forth clouds of rancid hot air through a vent. Here was some kind of warmth.

He inched his way through the slush, each tottering step more hesitant, more feeble than the last. Close to the hot air vent, he tripped over a snow-covered garbage pail cover and slipped wearily and without struggle to the pavement beneath the vent. He lay there and felt the billows of hot, greasy air roll out over him and was grateful that he had timed his fall so well. It was almost like falling over a whiskey bottle and finding it full instead of empty.

"Fell down . . . have to lay here," he told himself. "Never make it up. Warm air coming out, though. Catch a little of that warm air." He gulped it in hungrily. "Fried potatoes. Fried potatoes. Smells like home fries."

Into his mind, numbed and distorted by alcohol and hunger, the smell of fried potatoes grew sharper - and sweeter. He began to hear voices, voices out of his past.

"Mom?" he mumbled into the puff of air that enveloped him."

"Fried potatoes, Mom? Huh? Fried potatoes?" He was a boy again, dancing around on the slick linoleum in his mother's kitchen.

"Yah, what does it look like? Fried potatoes just for you and me, George."

"Where's everybody else, Mom?"

He could hear her so plainly. "Your sisters are by a church social tonight. Will be just Mother and George for supper."

"And fried potatoes, boy, ah boy! I'm gonna eat about a million of them, I betcha!" He slid across the slippery floor to the table, but before he reached it, it floated out of his grasp and, with it, the plateful of brown, crispy, sweet-smelling fried potatoes.

And he was an old man again, broken, lying in a puddle of icy muck in a Skid Row alley. But the vent fan speeded up and blew a sour stench out into the dismal brick canyon. The old man cackled in delight. He could smell those fried potatoes, and the voices were different voices now but just as clear.

"Be careful, George. You'll make me spill this hot grease."

It was Beth. He always recognized her voice, even in a jumbled dream.

"Fried potatoes! you're sweet to have me to dinner. Fact is, you're wonderful."

"Me - or the fried potatoes?" She was teasing him now. "Both. Oh Beth, I love you so much! Beth, let's get married. Let's don't wait longer."

"George, you're hurting my shoulder. Move out of the way."

In his dream, the old man moaned and moved closer to the wall. "Beth, will you marry me?"

"Later, George. My goodness, John's only been dead six months." Her voice was as cold as - as the sleet on his face. "Look out, George, the fried potatoes are done."

The air vent above him rasped off. The fan expelled its last cloud of slimy steam, and the smell of the frying potatoes was conquered by the icy wind. There was no warmth at all now above the moaning, freezing old man.

But Beth's voice was still there, cold and chill.

"I have to tell you, George. It's true. I was married yesterday afternoon. I'm sorry. I thought I loved you but I was wrong. You'll have to go now. My husband gave me ten minutes to tell you I never want to see you again."

Now his heart was chilled. Those words of Beth had done it.

He remembered them - how they had driven him to where he was now. His mind thawed enough

to remember the years in between. He hadn't gone down all at once. He had been a successful man when Beth had turned cold against him. For a while, he had continued to work hard. But his heart wasn't there.

Then his mother died. And he was alone. She hadn't wanted him to be alone. Even when she was dying, she was calling out and begging him to turn to GOD. But he knew better. There was no GOD, and he had proved it for himself until at last he lay at the very end of Skid Row.

When the last bit of warmth had left the alley, the old man rolled over in the puddle of slush in the alley and sat up suddenly. Yes, there was an end to Skid Row and now he remembered where it was.

His gray hair was plastered to his forehead. His ragged overcoat was wet through. But he pulled together all his determination and his strength and began dragging his weak body through the mud and water of the alley toward a fire escape that hung a few feet from the hot air vent of the hotel kitchen. He grabbed it, pulled himself to his feet, and muttering, started off to find the bottom end of Skid Row - in the direction of Lake Michigan.

It was almost eleven o'clock in the morning when George reached the deserted strip of beach just east of the Loop.

The frozen sand crunched under his faltering footsteps as he staggered along - almost blinded by the cutting wind driving in off the angry, gray water. He was a sick man and his wavering mind knew one thing: he must be careful that nobody saw him, or he'd be fished up alive. And that would spoil everything.

He shuddered and then he smiled when he remembered that now at last he was almost at the end.

All he had to do was to find one minute when there was no one in sight. Just walk about fifty painful steps out to the breakwater. Then just a little struggle - and he was very sure that he would not struggle much - and it would all be over.

He pushed one foot after the other. Those feet wouldn't have to carry him much further. He hobbled out on the breakwater. Thirty seconds more . . .

"Hey there! No ya don't! Not here. No, I tell ya. And I'm here to see to it that ya don't sneak back, neither."

The broad-shouldered, blue-uniformed cop loomed out of the haze. George wavered, almost jumped anyway, and then shuddered back toward the beach. He'd seen plenty of others dragged up alive. There wasn't any sense fighting the cop who'd be hanging around, waiting for him to come back and try again.

Somehow, he managed to force his trembling old legs to take him back to the Loop again. There at the Northwestern Railroad Station, he huddled in a corner by a big stove and emptied his pockets of every scrap of identification. They couldn't beat old George. Beth thought she had - way back there in the dim past. Even his mother - by dying and leaving him with nothing but empty promises about GOD. And all the parade of friends and enemies who had cluttered up the

years of living. Now at the very end, the cop. But he would beat them. He smiled pathetically, stretched out his hands for a final warming, and then started back to the lake.

Again he tottered out to the breakwater. It would be easy.

Spread his arms and fall in, or just step in. He reached a foot out tentatively. The cop was still there.

"Beat it!" he shouted.

Beaten, even in his attempt at death, old George crawled inside an empty, abandoned packing box on the breakwater and began to sob like a child. Still the burly, heartless cop persisted. He pounded on the packing box with his stick until the old man poked a tear-stained, imploring face outside.

Then the cop grabbed George by the collar of his ragged coat, jerked him to his feet, and turned his face away from the lake. In humiliation and defeat, George let the cop march him away from the beach until he freed him, facing west on Van Buren Street.

He began shuffling along once more, muttering to himself.

His memories no longer warmed him or chilled him. He had no more tears of anguish for his own defeat. He was just an old man who hated the world and wanted to get rid of it. "Won't even let a man take his own life. Well, I'll fix that. Wait till it's dark. Can't stop me then."

Music coming from somewhere cut through his defiant mutterings, but he ignored it. "Can't stop me then." He slowed down to a halt, stopped to pick up an old newspaper that looked dry enough to stuff inside his coat for warmth. When he straightened up, he was staring into the building from which the music came.

It was that religious place - the Pacific Garden Mission. A new plan began to take shape fuzzily. Here was a place he could wait unmolested, and warm, until it was dark. No cops would come looking for him. Nobody would ask him any questions.

When it was dark, he would leave the mission and throw himself into Lake Michigan with dignity.

He stumbled through the doorway and presently found himself standing in the back of a large room. There were rows and rows of chairs, all empty. He stood there, dripping muddy slush from every edge and seam of his soaked clothing. Suddenly he was aware of music again. Up front in this room, a man was playing something that sounded kind and warm.

He moved toward the nearest chair and slumped into it.

Loosening his grasp on the frayed front of his coat, he began to let the warmth in the room caress his exhausted body. His head nodded forward. He had come to the right place. Warm. Nice music. Nobody to bother him.

Suddenly in his daze he heard a shuffle of feet behind him.

Something that smelled like bad whiskey brushed past and the seat next to him creaked heavily. He pulled himself back from the delicious drowsiness. Sitting next to him was a bum from the street that matched him for filth and loneliness. And George saw that the empty room was filling up - with men from the street, derelicts of all ages, filing in and slumping into seats around him. He was part of a vast sea of human wreckage, and he sniffled against the back of his hand and remembered foggily that this was what missions were for. He supposed this was what they called a chapel - as if he cared.

But on the other side of the mission chapel were men in clean shirts, with shaven faces. Their shoulders were back and their heads were up. They were clean and dry and sober.

And as he sat there numbly, one after another of those men rose and told their stories. In the warmth, the frozen numbness of his mind began to thaw a little, and he found himself listening. But what these men said didn't make much sense. They kept mentioning "the blessed Name of JESUS." They kept calling JESUS CHRIST their "own personal Saviour." But when they talked, they smiled. Old George could tell an honest man when he met one, and these men were honest. They knew what they were talking about. They had been creatures of his world - and now they were men.

"The blessed Name of JESUS."

"JESUS CHRIST, my own personal Saviour."

"Nobody forces GOD on anybody. A man has a right to choose."

Suddenly as he listened to story after story, the old man felt as though his skull were about to burst wide open.

What were they saying? Could it be true? For sixty-five years he had laughed at the idea of GOD. His world - his miserable, lonely, bitter world - had always ended with the top of his own head. His mother had promised him there was a GOD, and he had bitterly called her a liar and gone his own way after her death. Would he be where he was if there were a GOD? But these men were talking as if they had met Him, as if they knew Him. The hammers rang and rang, and suddenly they became hammers of truth that seemed bent upon breaking down the narrow confines of his own doubting mind that had held him prisoner for all these years.

Looking neither to the right nor left, as though he were the only man in the world being drawn by a magnet to stand before GOD, old George stumbled up the aisle of the mission chapel.

"Where'll I find Him? If there is a GOD, somebody show me where to find Him!"

Then he found himself in a small room, filled with clean warmth, and beside him was a man who talked to him in a gentle voice.

"GOD's nearer than breathing and closer than hands and feet, George. GOD transformed Himself into our image and came to earth in the Person of JESUS CHRIST so that we might be trans-

formed into His image. GOD became man at this lowest place of all - the place of sin. He was crucified and died between two thieves. This meant that He went so low that He could get under the lowest sinner."

George heard the words but he could not comprehend them.

"No, it's too late for me; I got only one way out."

The gentle voice came very close. "That's suicide, isn't it?"

"How did you know?" Too late, he remembered the cop.

He cowered away from the man, expecting punishment, argument, hatred.

But the man looked neither surprised nor angry. "George, George, when a man gets to the place where he knows - when he absolutely knows he's come to the end of himself - when he's heading for the lake or carrying a loaded pistol for himself - then GOD can really take over."

"Huh?"

The voice became very gentle.

"You see, George, when a man admits he's helpless to go on in this life under his own steam - that cry for a way out GOD can satisfy completely. It would be the best thing that ever happened to you if you could die right now to yourself. Then you could be born again - into the Kingdom of GOD."

"Me? Me?" George was almost sobbing now.

"George - just turn around - turn your back on your old life - the one you wanted to plunge into Lake Michigan - that's all."

"But I never did anything but blast GOD."

The man put his hand on George's shoulder. "No man earns salvation, George. The Bible says, '**By grace are ye saved... not of works, lest any man should boast.**' The Bible says, '**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.**' '**The gift of God is eternal life.**' '**Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.**'"

"Water of life - huh?"

"What you want to do is trade the waters of Lake Michigan for the waters of life, George. That's what you're looking for, believe me. If you die to yourself, you can live forever in JESUS CHRIST."

Old George did exactly that. On January 29, 1919, he turned away from the cold waters of Lake Michigan and turned his face to GOD instead. That stormy night, when he was an old man of

sixty-five, he found that Skid Row does indeed have an end. It has two, and he found the One that offers the waters of life instead of the waters of death.

The old man left the mission a new man. He lived for his Lord in simple, honest faith during the years that were left to him. Today George A. Lind dwells in the presence of his Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST.

~ end of chapter 5 ~
